Most leaders strive to do the right thing for their organizations. But is making the effort enough? And is more expected of healthcare leaders, particularly CEOs and board chairmen, than those in other fields when it comes to honesty, integrity and how they conduct themselves?

In 2007, the Harvard Business Review conducted an in-depth study of 125 leaders with a reputation for authenticity. What the study found was that these leaders did not reveal any universal characteristic, trait, skill or style that led to their success;

One can argue that not only is more expected, but to be truly effective, healthcare leaders must be authentic and transparent in the way they lead their organizations. This approach can provide leaders the opportunity to sustain an organizational culture that creates value by recognizing personal accountability and encourages others to achieve the organization’s goals. A genuine leader builds teams, fosters commitment and bonds staff.

There is no formal definition of what an authentic and transparent leader is or an exact formula for attaining those traits, but possessing a level of self-awareness is a good start: What are your values and principles? What kind of person are you? How do others view you as a leader? Do your peers and staff trust you?

instead, each had a commitment to developing himself or herself.

A group of leading healthcare executives have similar views as the Harvard Business Review study: that authentic leaders constantly try to better themselves, all with the goal to better the organization. In addition, these healthcare executives also use words such as empathy, compassion, integrity and trust when describing attributes of an authentic leader.

“For me being an authentic leader begins with knowing yourself, your value sets, and what motivates you and understanding what you enjoy doing,” says Paula R. Autry, FACHE, president and COO, Mount Carmel East Hospital, Columbus, Ohio. “At a higher level being an authentic leader means understanding the gifts you’ve been given.”
What It Takes to Be an Authentic and Transparent Leader

Autry says her life experiences played a significant part in becoming an authentic and transparent leader. She says she never aspired to be in the position she is in but that her life has led her to the role. She explains that a good portion of her childhood was spent caring for an ill sister and taking her to various healthcare facilities for treatment.

“It is clear that that involvement early in my life exposed me to healthcare and made me look at it from the standpoint of provision of care,” says Autry. “Experiences form a value set, particularly if you saw people struggle or struggled yourself and you came out of it with a sense of responsibility to make a difference.”

An authentic leader, Autry says, then aligns her behaviors and actions with the goals of the organization.

Why are the values that make up who you are as a leader so important to being an authentic leader, especially for healthcare executives? Thomas C. Dolan, PhD, FACHE, CAE, president and CEO of the American College of Healthcare Executives, says the answer is that for healthcare leaders their patients (customers) are turning their lives over to them. “Patients want to know that the organization is caring and compassionate,” he says.

“Staff is under a great deal of stress to treat patients, and you have to relate to your staff and patients in a caring and authentic way. It is a difficult job.”

Having integrity, says Swedish, is an important value and one that can be developed. It also is one that Alan H. Channing, FACHE, president and CEO, Sinai Health System, Chicago, talks about more than any other when discussing what it takes to be an authentic leader.

Being an authentic and transparent leader, says Channing, means doing what you say you are going to do, even if the outcome is not what the other person or group of people wants. For instance, Channing says he had a discussion with a nurse who asked him to look into a particular policy regarding deadlines. The nurse had missed several deadlines and wanted to know if the policy regarding deadlines could be circumvented.

“I told her I would investigate the situation, and I did,” says Channing. “I told her I could not violate the institutional policy to help her, as much as I wanted to help people understand what the organization stands for and what is its true commitment to the community.”
her personally, because it would make all the other institutional policies meaningless. She thanked me for following up and said she still respected me. That last comment was most important to me.”

Patrick G. Hays, FACHE, advisor to management and chairman of the board at Trinity Health, Novi, Mich., says he also was approached by an employee with a request when he was the CEO of a health system in California that included nearly 30 hospitals and some 45,000 employees.

“One of our best and brightest middle managers scheduled an appointment with me,” says Hays. “In our meeting he told me his wife had been diagnosed with an aggressive cancer and that her oncologists recommended a new, high-dose radiation therapy that was only available at another hospital. The manager and his wife were members of our hospital’s own HMO. He told me that our HMO had denied coverage of the ‘experimental therapy,’ but his wife’s physicians believed strongly that she should try it. I explained to the manager that the HMO’s approach was standard to managed care organizations. He responded, ‘Then why are we investing a lot of money at our hospital in the same technological programming?’ This caused me to reflect on the fact that as an integrated healthcare system, why would one part of the system be doing something that another part of the system wouldn’t cover? I called the health plan CEO and medical director and we thought it through. As a result, our hospital’s health plan became the first insurer in California to cover the treatment. In being authentic, I was willing to question a standard practice and by doing so was able to serve this employee and many of our other patients.”

Being an authentic leader often involves possessing intangible qualities such as trust and integrity, but there are things leaders can do to make themselves and their organization authentic. Trinity Health leaders, for example, have in place a formal organizational mechanism that ensures they are making decisions ethically. It is called a “mission discernment process,” and Trinity Health leaders use it when they deal with major projects that influence the direction of the organization, the lives of its associates or the services it provides to patients. This process examines these projects juxtaposed against the organization’s mission, vision and core values and tests that decision against the organization’s beliefs. The decision then validates that the direction is consistent with the cultural characteristics of the organization.

“We use this process so we know that the project, as we get ready to implement it, is truly consistent with what we represent and that our decisions are truly authentic and transparent,” says Swedish. “Sometimes our decisions affect large-scale capital projects and sometimes a decision is made not to proceed. The organization clarifies why the decision was made, and we put it into a construct that links back to our core values as a faith-based organization. We want to make certain we are completely consistent in who we are and that we are consistent with what we represent.”

Even if the project Trinity Health leaders are reviewing has the potential to save the organization a good sum of money, if it does not meet discernment-process guidelines, it won’t be approved, says Hays.

Dolan says it is not uncommon for nonprofit healthcare organizations to use a process to determine if a major program or project aligns with the institution’s mission, vision and core values. “What distinguishes organizations who use a mission discernment process is how formally they do it and how effective it is,” he says. At ACHE, we always think about mission, vision and core values before we advance or fund a program. When organizations don’t do this, that’s when they get into trouble.”
One common theme among the group of healthcare executives interviewed for this article is that for them, an authentic leader is someone who possesses humility and freely admits when he makes a mistake.

Being humble is a trait all leaders should have, says Channing, who learned early on in life how to keep his ego in check. "I remember something my mother often said to me as a young child after I thought I did something really well: 'If you pat yourself on the back too much you will get round shouldered,'" says Channing. "She worked hard at keeping me from getting outside myself. Today I describe myself as having a strong ego—I’m comfortable with who I am—but not a lot of ego needs. I don’t need the trappings of the office to feel good. I get my rewards from seeing the organization respond in a positive way to the things I am trying to do."

One of the toughest things for any leader to do is to admit when he is wrong, says Dolan, because often others in the organization view the leader as someone who has all the answers. An authentic leader is someone who is strong enough to admit a mistake, and no matter how many times he is told how great he is as a leader, an authentic leader stays grounded in who he is.

"You can’t believe your press clippings," says Dolan. "That doesn’t mean you have to totally dismiss them."

An authentic leader is someone who is approachable by staff, says Dolan. The one thing any leader needs is honest feedback from staff, but there are times when that does not happen.

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Addrs Autry: "First, you have to be willing to accept honest feedback. I started by seeking input from my family, but also I have mentors outside of the organization who provide feedback, even if it is something I don’t want to hear. It also is important to create relationships with subordinates and peers in which you show you are willing to take the feedback, provide acknowledgement that what they gave is valuable information and then act on that information if appropriate."

A good way to obtain honest feedback on the kind of leader you are is through 360-degree assessments, says Dolan, who participates in one every three to five years. "You should be continually asking people what you can do to make yourself more effective," he says. "Getting input on your leadership abilities from all different levels, not just other CEOs, is important."

An outcome of having an authentic leader who is humble and willing to admit mistakes can be seen in employees who are more likely to be motivated in their jobs, says Autry. "Our largest resource is people," she says. "We will only be as successful as the people who work with us as a team. Employees also identify with an authentic leader because she does not ask staff to do something she would not do."

What being a successful authentic leader comes down to, says Channing, is that the leader and the organization are one and the same. "To me it means creating a plan for myself and the organization based on three clear elements: mission, vision and values," he says. "These are a core part of how I think of my role as the leader of the organization. If I'm articulating a plan of where the institution will go, I have to live that myself. I can't be separate and apart from that. I often think of myself as a personification of the organization."

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